

## FROM CLAN TO PUNK: IMPUTED MEANINGS OF THE TARTAN

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We all associate meaning with textile designs. If we can see the principles of Revolutionary zeal and the sanction of family life and work in one textile design, we can perceive the explicit Modernism of another and realize that in the complex decisions that comprise the creation of a textile, we have fashioned our world and its values. Perhaps the textile is small, but its condensed values and meaning may be a more clarified perception about the world than most others. For many, such as Roland Barthes, textiles and clothing can thereby be described as a sign system offering a language by which we have non-verbal communication in the world. The effectiveness of such a sign system as Barthes proposes depends upon the sharp denotation and appropriate connotations of the visual sign that inheres within the textile. That is, we would have to know, or at least agree upon, its meaning. If language with uncertain meanings become a tower of Babel, textiles without explicit meaning can be for Barthes only stammering stuff, not objects that speak with eloquence and directness. But I ask if we seek rhetoric in our objects, or rather, if we not hear a stronger voice in the stillness of complexity, conversation, and consideration.

I want to address one textile example, tartan, and to offer the possibility that Barthes' metaphor of a sign system in textiles and dress is inaccurate and insufficient. I shall not argue for the lack of meaning in non-verbal communication, specifically in the messages of textiles, but rather of their shifting interpretive potential, something that may even surpass language as a supreme act of human relations and human achievements. To be sure, one of the most banal vulgarizations of Barthes' idea of the discourse of dress is Alison Lurie's sophomoric "The Language of Clothes" in which she claims,

Most distinctive of all [among plaids and checks] is the tartan of the Scottish Highlanders. ... these plaids

have an ancient political significance. ... even today the display of clan tartans is often a political act. It is also highly informative: since each clan has a distinctive pattern or patterns, a knowledgeable person can identify the owner of a shawl or kilt as a descendant of one of well over a hundred ancient families.

Lurie goes on to lament the extension of tartans to umbrellas, outfits for Scottie dogs, and the like insisting that there is a connection to clan and a logical association with hard work and serious effort. Everything that Lurie claims is spurious; her assertion about history is wrong and can be demonstrated to be perniciously wrong; her assumption regarding our interpretation of textiles is, I believe, also wrong and must be rejected. Textiles are not a simple language to be translated into words and made into equivalents; they are subtle, ever changing visual display, prismatic in their complexity, and always elusive and all-important in their meanings.

Hugh Trevor-Roper has written compellingly in 1983 of "The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition of Scotland" in which he demonstrates that much that we associate with ancient Scotland and with the so-called clan heritage of the tartan is nothing other than a fabrication of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries at a time when political spirit and the Romantic imagination could be abetted by a sense of Scottish tradition, even a fictitious one. Concepts of clan, kilt, and tartan coalesced around 1822 and became a coded set of signifiers, as we might now describe them, because of the nationalistic and Romantic fervor of the period. We know that the clans of the Scottish Highlanders did not have clan-associated tartans until the last years of the eighteenth century and that the idea was subsequently advanced by wool merchants in order to generate business. Depictions of Scottish Highlanders in battles of the English civil wars of the seventeenth century demonstrate that they wore a miscellany of dress, never groupings of one tartan. Richard Waitt painted portraits of the members of the clan Grant in the early years of the eighteenth century; they wear tartan textiles of election, not of clan association. The various members of the clan wear different tartans, presumably because there was no sense at the time of a clan tartan, but rather of selecting the tartan one liked the most. In some

eighteenth-century portraits, the Scots wear more than one tartan pattern, suggesting that mix and match was more important than one tartan alone. None of the clan Grant members in eighteenth-century portraiture wear what would be called a Grant tartan in the twentieth century. Michael Wright's 1660 portrait of Mungo Murray does not show the twentieth-century Murray tartan.

Of a related history, the kilt as we know it is probably an eighteenth-century invention. Scottish gentlemen wore a basic form of trousers known as trews; peasants, unable to afford breeches or trousers, wore kilts (the name arrived from the Swedish *kilta*, to swathe or bundle; thus, a copious cloth for loose bundling around the body), a garment especially appropriate for crossing rivers and not getting pants wet and for wrapping oneself in on a night spent outdoors in dewy and brisk Scotland; in the mid-eighteenth-century pre-industrialization of Scotland, Thomas Rawlinson needed a modified dress for the Highland workers in his charcoal and iron foundries that would be less dangerous than the loose kilt with its risky amplitude of material unsuitable for the proto-modern factory. Rawlinson had a tailor modify the copious kilt into a philibeg, or short kilt of two parts, one the plaid over the shoulder and the other the kilt, now pleated. Trevor-Roper provides a terse summary of the invention of the kilt:

the kilt is a purely modern costume, first designed, and first worn, by an English Quaker industrialist, ... bestowed by him on the Highlanders in order not to preserve their traditional way of life but to ease its transformation: to bring them out of the heather and into the factory.

In tartans, "clan" tartans did not exist in 1746 as the kilt was being developed for factory service. But the 1746 Battle of Culloden meant that Scotland was vanquished and the new English orders of suppression by Acts of Parliament of nationality extended to cover the tartan as well as the philibeg, trews, and other elements of Highland dress, however new. The dress bans of 1747 were on civilian dress and the military was specifically exempted by the "Disarming Act" from the tartan ban. What happened from 1747 to roughly 1819 was, then, the great bifurcation in tartan dress. With tartan

outlawed to the civilian population, it lost its opprobrium as peasant clothing, the peasants being scared of wearing it. Moreover, the great move to Scottish industrialization that would flower in nineteenth-century Glasgow encouraged the modernization of dress. Concomitantly, the idea of Highland dress was stored in the collective historical attic; when it was revived in the years leading up to 1822, it had been forgotten by some two or three generations in civilian dress and could be remembered, however deceptively, however naively, to have been the ancient dress of the Highlands, not that so recently worn as the standard peasant dress before 1746. The ban on tartan was hugely successful, but so inimical to a natural historical process, that it promoted the violent re-assertion of the tartan, sanctioned by a spurious sense of history, in the next century.

Significantly, the military use of tartan was permitted and ascendant in the same period. Wanting the service of the fierce Highland regiments, the British military encouraged the regiments' self-identification within the British army. Whereas the Scottish clans had been content with badges and heather and other props of identification according to eighteenth-century texts, they seized upon regimental tartans for identification in the second half of the eighteenth century. Hence, the Black Watch (43<sup>rd</sup> Regiment) created a regimental tartan and other regiments did likewise.

In 1782, the House of Commons repealed the prohibition on Highland dress. Anyone could wear tartan and kilt with impunity. The irony is that probably virtually no one had wanted to wear the Highland dress when it was banned; now that it was restored to the possibility of dress, it flourished. Sir Walter Scott and other ardent enthusiasts for the romance of Scotland endorsed wearing tartan as a badge of national honor. The military had begun to establish the tartan and kilt internationally as a sign of Scotland and its military prowess. In 1820, the Celtic Society of Edinburgh was founded by Colonel David Stewart of Garth and Sir Walter Scott in order to promote the use of "ancient" Highland dress. This society is especially indicative as it extended the concept of the Highlands to all of Scotland; Edinburgh is a Lowland city; Sir Walter Scott was a Lowlander; in the 1820s, the Lowlanders appropriated the Highland ethos

as a representation of all Scotland. Historical accounts would indicate that many Lowlanders were chagrined at the time in this transgression of the separations within Scotland, but many others seem to have been enthralled by the proposition that there was such a long and significant heritage that could be identified with Scotland that Lowlanders forgot that they used to scorn the Highlanders as uncouth ruffians and accepted them as, in good Enlightenment terms, noble savages that represented the best of the unadulterated Scottish spirit. In 1822, Stewart published a book "Sketches of the Character, Manners, and Present State of the Highlanders of Scotland," that also promoted his unjustified idea that the kilt was an ancient tradition and that tartan was a Highland clan custom.

But a book and a dress-up society were not the big events of 1822 in the history of tartan: George IV came to Edinburgh, the first Hanoverian monarch to visit the capital of Scotland. He was greeted with great ceremony in arrangements made by Sir Walter Scott and Colonel Stewart of Garth; George IV's arrival in Leith (the port of Edinburgh), and his days and nights in Edinburgh were bedecked in tartan. Stewart and Scott saw this occasion as the great flowering of the tartan. Trevor-Roper denounces the entire affair as a farce, but its impact was enormous; it would seem that this visit presages the acts of orchestrated political propaganda that we have come to know very well in the twentieth century. The myth of the tartan was operative and the frenzy of tartan that Scott and Stewart promoted was aided by the manufacturers who, having known for some three or four years in advance of the king's trip to Edinburgh, created new pattern books of tartans, often with first clan attributions probably picked entirely out of the air. William Wilson and Sons of Bannockburn produced a key pattern book in 1819, knowing of the Royal visit, that ascribed many clan names to tartans they had heretofore been producing just identified by numbers. Even at the time, some people knew that the events around 1822 were overzealous and represented a distortion of history: Lord Macaulay wrote in the 1850s that the tartan and kilt mania of 1822

reached a point beyond which it was not easy to proceed. That last British king who held a court in Holyrood thought that he could not give a more strik-

ing proof of his respect for the usages which had prevailed in Scotland before the Union, than by disguising himself in what, before the Union, was considered by nine Scotchmen out of ten as the dress of a thief.

Macaulay knew that the disparaged dress of peasants before 1746 was in 1822 the dress of national identity. Absurd as an historical reversal, it is instructive to us, in that dress suppression becomes completely transposed in some seventy-five years, not through revocation, but through the desire to reaffiliate pattern and clothing with some meaning.

In 1842, the Sobieski-Stuart brothers published the epochal "Vestiarum Scoticum," a work they had been developing for more than twenty years. It can be seen as a further elaboration of the pedigree of the clan tartan connection, justifying the concept with reference to ancient documents in several forms. The book was printed in a limited edition of fifty copies and was a sumptuous example of the new color printing with color plates of the purported clan tartans. In 1844, the Sobieski-Stuarts published "The Costume of the Clans," a more elaborate justification of the clan matrix of the tartan ascribing specific clan identity to fifty-five sets or designs. This second sumptuous book had a much larger printing and a greater effect. Its assertion that Highland costume was the sole authentic and surviving example of medieval dress continuous in Europe only in the Highlands from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century was, in itself, highly conjectural and offered with scant support other than enthusiasm. In like manner, the Sobieski-Stuarts accepted without question the clan relations of tartans that had been produced by the Scottish wool merchants in the period of 1819 to 1822, as if the Wilson of Bannockburn clan name certified an affiliation going back two or three centuries. Here, the Sobieski-Stuarts were in real trouble, for anyone looking at the tartan pattern books of 1819 to 1822 would have realized the cacophony of different names for the same thing, the chaos of clan attributions, and the complete capriciousness of that association. But the Sobieski-Stuarts, who had accompanied their vehement publishing with a nearly royal lifestyle (these beguiling charlatans had assumed the Stuart name of the Scottish royal house as borne by the Old

Pretender who was titular James III of the United Kingdom and James VIII of Scotland and the Sobieski name of the Polish princess who married James VIII), were more acutely attacked for the falseness of their own supposed associations with both the Sobieskis and the Stuarts, both of which were spurious; they left Scotland never to return.

Their alleged scholarship was thoroughly discredited, as it should have been. They made up their purported facts; they made reference to ancient texts that probably never existed; they were creating a fantasied civilization that might have anticipated a Scottish Disneyworld with national adventure embodied in tartan design. But, Baudrillard reminds us that Disneyland is the perfect model of simulations in the real world. If you walk the Royal Mile in Edinburgh in 1988, it is a kilt-and-tartan touristic Disneyworld. "Disneyland," says Baudrillard, "is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation". For the French philosopher of our time, we need to know the illusion as a kind of reality in order to understand fully the reality of contemporary civilization. I would like to excuse the prevarications of the Sobieski-Stuart brothers with a nod to Baudrillard; they lied and they cheated, but they did something quite extraordinary in ascribing a meaning to textile design that has more or less stuck: false as it is, the Sobieski-Stuarts fostered a myth of textile identification and implication that has served a continuing and compelling social need for well over a hundred years. They may have been factually wrong, but culturally very right.

Intellectually discredited and with the authors exiled, the Sobieski-Stuarts' books of 1842 and 1844 had an impact in ideas transmitted to other authors. In 1845 and 1847, James Logan published a two-volume quarto edition "The Clans of the Scottish Highlands" with illustrations by R.R. McLan. A one-volume reprint edition of this book is now almost always available on the remainder market. Lady Antonia Fraser, in her introduction, makes a noble effort to give the book authority without granting it veracity; she says,

'The heather grew in his heart' wrote a contemporary of McIan. 'And there was no music he loved so well as the bagpipe on the wild hill-side.' It is to be hoped that this reissue of McIan's finest composite work will recapture this spirit of high Victorian romance. It will also demonstrate that ardent and loving approach to Scottish history which animated both Logan and McIan.

To see this book today as a Victorian vision of the past and of the potency of garments and of one textile concept, the tartan, to command dress is, I think, of considerable importance. We would be misled to see this book as authoritative in the sense of objective history, but perhaps we are coming to realize late in the twentieth century that history is not objective. History is informed by our needs and desires; perhaps history is even constituted not in its elements, but in the dynamic interchange between the objects and events of the past and our contemporary explanations and requirements; "the pattern we call history is not in the past, but in ourselves," said Anthony Burgess.

Tartans have a checkered history, or should I say a tartanized history, one that depends on variant interpretations of the same design. In the twentieth century, the tartan has undergone even more dramatic transformations in meaning. It was in the 1970s and 1980s a standard of punk fashion, its deliberate subversion of the Anglo-Saxon tradition being for such designers as Vivienne Westwood and Stephen Sprouse an opportunity to reinvest a textile design, once banned, with its insurrectionist potential. Westwood included tartan in her "seditionaries" collection of 1977 in a juxtaposition that can only recall the seditious aspect of the eighteenth-century tartan. Yet, there are other designers of our century who have used the tartan in manifest allegiance to the Establishment and specifically to the conservative Anglo-Saxon tradition. No savage warrior stands behind Laura Ashley's use of tartan or Ralph Lauren's, but indisputably these designers associate the tartan not necessarily with clan but with the traditional grace and style of the United Kingdom. In France, Jean Paul Gaultier and, in Italy, Giorgio Armani and Gianfranco Ferré have demonstrated a keen attraction for tartan.



Tartan has long been popular, as a function of Victorian development of childhood, as a motif of children's clothing. Tartans have often been associated with the out-of-doors, used in the lining of outercoats for rough and inclement weather. (I caution you, however, that the Burberry check is a district check and not a tartan.)

Thus, the tartan can be said to cross from the civilian to the military and back to the civilian again. Likewise, it passes from the Establishment to the Disestablishment. Of course, the tartan's popularity and role have been influenced by the British Royal Family. Queen Victoria adored Scotland and established residence at Balmoral, using tartan in her furnishings for the castle and authorizing the special Balmoral tartan which can only be produced by Royal warrant and for the Royal family; most recently, Prince Charles has an abiding love of Scotland and specifically of Balmoral. He accompanies this love of the place with an ardor for its dress.

Certainly the kilt is nostalgic or historicist dress for the latter years of the twentieth century. It is not odd in the sense that in our time we are searching history for ideas that will lead us to and through the millennium that is a scant dozen years ahead. But a suite of images of tartans and a brief inquiry into their history perhaps requires us to think deeply even of that model of history and historical investigation that we bring to a work of art, whether it is a painting or textile. When we use historical evidence with respect to a painting, we may be looking at something that is tantamount to a wholly considered, wholly verbalized act of art. When we consider textiles, we are describing the raw matter from which visualizations are made, whether they are real people in clothing or the depiction of people in clothing. The historical explanation, conventionally perceived, of tartan is so filled with contradiction as to be impossible to follow. We cannot construct a correct succession of perceptions about tartan, because the design idea has never been completely exposed. More importantly, the design idea of tartan has, I think, never been complete nor will it ever be complete. The meaning of tartan is ever changing and evolving. Its ascriptions to clans, national, or family, or Establishment values are all disputable and uncertain at best. Michael Baxandall, in his recent book "Patterns of Intention: On the

Historical Explanation of Pictures” says of the historical examination of a painting, “the painter's complex problem of good picture-making becomes a serial and continually self-redefining operation, permanent problem-reformulation ... ”

I am in agreement with Baxandall on the manner in which the artist is engaged in the permanent problem-reformulation of her or his work of art. I am further in agreement that we, as historians of textiles and art, are engaged in the permanent problem-reformulation of works of art, even the concept of the tartan. Is there endemic, sure meaning to the tartan? I think not. The meaning of interpretation resides not in the textile design, but in all ever-needful return to the design that reinvests it with meaning, that gives tartan its meaning that is never tangible, never certifiable, and consequently ever ceaseless in our imagination. If we knew and could define and secure its meaning, would this pattern be unremitting to the imagination and infinite in its design history? In this, I am not speaking to endorse ignorance. Instead, I speak on behalf of the tartan's presence beyond history and specific knowledge. No meaning is proved for the tartan. But in having no objectified meaning, tartan has the property of being a vessel or container of meaning, a design form that exists not only in history but through history, not merely of the place of Scotland, not of the Sobieski-Stuarts, not just of MacGregors or MacDonalids, but of the permanent problem reformulation that is design's supreme expression beyond Scotland and the nineteenth century, in fact beyond all place and all time.

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